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Clueless in America

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We don't hear a great deal about education in the presidential campaign. It's much too serious a topic to compete with such fun stuff as Hillary tossing back a shot of whiskey, or Barack rolling a gutter ball.

The nation's future may depend on how well we educate the current and future generations, but (like the renovation of the nation's infrastructure, or a serious search for better sources of energy) that can wait. At the moment, no one seems to have the will to engage any of the most serious challenges facing the U.S.

An American kid drops out of high school every 26 seconds. That's more than a million every year, a sign of big trouble for these largely clueless youngsters in an era in which a college education is crucial to maintaining a middle-class quality of life - and for the country as a whole in a world that is becoming more hotly competitive every day.

Ignorance in the United States is not just bliss, it's widespread. A recent survey of teenagers by the education advocacy group Common Core found that a quarter could not identify Adolf Hitler, a third did not know that the Bill of Rights guaranteed freedom of speech and religion, and fewer than half knew that the Civil War took place between 1850 and 1900.

"We have one of the highest dropout rates in the industrialized world," said Allan Golston, the president of U.S. programs for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In a discussion over lunch recently he described the situation as "actually pretty scary, alarming."

Roughly a third of all American high school students drop out. Another third graduate but are not prepared for the next stage of life - either productive work or some form of post-secondary education.

When two-thirds of all teenagers old enough to graduate from high school are incapable of mastering college-level work, the nation is doing something awfully wrong.

Mr. Golston noted that the performance of American students, when compared with their peers

in other countries, tends to grow increasingly dismal as they move through the higher grades:

“In math and science, for example, our fourth graders are among the top students globally. By roughly eighth grade, they're in the middle of the pack. And by the 12th grade, U.S. students are scoring generally near the bottom of all industrialized countries.”

Many students get a first-rate education in the public schools, but they represent too small a fraction of the whole.

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, offered a brutal critique of the nation's high schools a few years ago, describing them as “obsolete” and saying, “When I compare our high schools with what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our work force of tomorrow.”

Said Mr. Gates: “By obsolete, I don't just mean that they are broken, flawed or underfunded, though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean our high schools - even when they're working as designed - cannot teach all our students what they need to know today.”

The Educational Testing Service, in a report titled “America's Perfect Storm,” cited

three powerful forces that are affecting the quality of life for millions of Americans and already shaping the nation's future. They are:

- The wide disparity in the literacy and math skills of both the school-age and adult populations. These skills, which play such a tremendous role in the lives of individuals and families, vary widely across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- The "seismic changes" in the U.S. economy that have resulted from globalization, technological advances, shifts in the relationship of labor and capital, and other developments.
- Sweeping demographic changes. By 2030, the U.S. population is expected to reach 360 million. That population will be older and substantially more diverse, with immigration having a big impact on both the population as a whole and the work force.

These and so many other issues of crucial national importance require an educated populace if they are to be dealt with effectively. At the moment we are not even coming close to equipping the population with the intellectual tools that are needed.

While we're effectively standing in place, other nations are catching up and passing us when it comes to educational achievement. You have to be pretty dopey not to see the implications of that.

But, then, some of us are pretty dopey. In the Common Core survey, nearly 20 percent of respondents did not know who the U.S. fought in World War II. Eleven percent thought that Dwight Eisenhower was the president forced from office by the Watergate scandal. Another 11 percent thought it was Harry Truman.

We've got work to do.